

Synechistic Critique of Aesthetic Judgment

Reza Negarestani

Even though the interwoven yarn of science and speculative philosophy has long frayed into separate individual threads, evolutions of both are driven by the same impetus – the history of shifts in perspectives. This is the history of the invention and modification of new perspectives as modes of epistemic mediation. From the eye of Zeno's tortoise that sees the geometrical synthesis of infinitely many terms to the medieval angel whose transitory location is defined by its noetic operation not by a pre-defined position to the diagram of the classical perspective in which vanishing point is the homothetic center of the observer's scope launched into infinity, to the telescopic perspective of the Copernican subject, who sees itself only from an imaginary point beyond the orbit of its manifest location: the trajectory of speculative and scientific thought takes shape as the evolution of perspective, an abstract technology for the systemic deracination of the subject. Rather than heralding the abolishment of the subject, the perspective operator cuts the subject loose from its immediate foundation by mapping it from one domain to another. Once the subject's reference point to any privileged instance or position (first or last, particular or generic) is removed, it is finally possible to draw a non-trivial passage from the local subject to the global structure, in effect realizing a continuity that defines an absolutized nature as a universal continuum. It is this non-trivial continuity that uproots the subject from its immediate foundation and reconstitutes it as a site in the reflexive relation of nature to itself.¹ For this reason, the reflective relation of the deracinated subject to itself and to nature cannot be addressed unless through the reflexive relation of the absolutized nature to itself. In other words, following Gabriel Catren's formula for absolving the Kantian legacy from its reactive pre-modern proclivities and remnants of anti-Copernicanism, the reflectivity of the subject must be subsumed within the reflexivity qua self-reflection of nature.² This subsumption is indeed tantamount to a "transcendental dehumanization of experience" (Catren) by way of opening a non-trivial space for

¹ Throughout this essay, the concept of non-triviality is used in a sense similar to its original application in mathematical language. In terms of conceptual behavior, triviality expresses a condition according to which the behavior of the concept regardless of the context and application is always the same (self-similar) and is not required to be modified. In terms of structure, triviality suggests a local-global relationship in which the global structure is simply the extension of the local structure (for example, the image of world being the extension of the image of man, or a cylinder – a global structure – being generated by the revolution of fiber or a local structure around a central axis). Non-triviality on the other hand is the expression of an asymmetry between local and global levels of the concept and structure. For example, a Möbius strip is a cylinder with a global twist or in other words, the global is not simply the extension of the local. Non-triviality is often a condition arising from a multi-modal continuity that permits different trajectories of evolution, global structural plasticity and complex local orientations. Accordingly, non-triviality entails epistemic navigation of different behaviors of the concept. It demands the change of perspective and action according to logic of rules, spatial situations and structural parameters.

² See Gabriel Catren, 'Outland Empire: Prolegomena to Speculative Absolutism' in *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism* (Melbourne: re.press, 2011), pp. 333-367.

transcendental faculties and modes of judgment, including aesthetic judgment.³

If the subject is now immersed in a continuous global structure, the separation of the subject from nature is a required epistemological distinction, not an inherent ontological severance. And if such separation is not ontological, then instantiations of the absolutized nature cannot be measured or scaled against the subject. The Bataillean 'nature as immensity' connotes a 'magnitude' only possible by a radical break in nature, thus conditioning a dialectics of magnitudes (between the magnitude of nature and the magnitude of the subject) suggestive of the pre-modern image of the world and the pre-Copernican account of nature. From a historical perspective, both the aesthetic judgment and aesthetic paradigms of art have been directly influenced by the determination of nature or a global structure for the subjective faculties in terms of magnitudes. Along with the history of shifts in perspective, the history of articulation of magnitudes should indeed be identified as the second defining trajectory for the evolution of speculative thought and science.

In order to briefly investigate the influence of the evolution of articulations of magnitude on art and reinterpret some of the concepts of aesthetics in terms of the determination and interaction of magnitudes, it would be best to begin with a classical but helpful definition of magnitude. "Magnitude is anything that may be said to be equal to or not equal to another. Two things are said to be equal, if in each statement you can substitute the one for the other."⁴ In this sense, magnitude is articulated through the dialectic of sameness-otherness or equality-inequality *within the same subject*. The credit and debit columns of a ledger represent magnitudes of gain and loss. A bar of iron expands as its temperature rises, expressing the magnitude of heat extended over the arrow of time. A windmill moves under the pressure of two different wind currents and, most importantly, the epistemological determination of nature that requires the dialectic of nature (natural causes) and thought (normative causes) within the subject – both expressions of magnitude. Mathematically speaking, quantity is the product of the dialectical articulation of magnitudes within 'one subject': the total balance of a ledger page, the extension of a bar of iron due to being heated, the amount of ground flour produced by the windmill, or a judgment undertaken by the thinking subject. Here quantity denotes the productivity implicit in the interaction of different magnitudes within a subject; it is a marker of intelligibility that can be extracted by measurement. In each of the previous cases, quantity is characterized dialectically as a negative link between two positive predicates or magnitudes whose opposition is not that of logic (i.e. it is not a contradiction) but that of balancing, compensation, suppression, translation and further disequilibrium of forces. Quantity is therefore the explicit or intelligible result of articulating or conjoining magnitudes, no longer as passive parts but instead as distinct dynamic and oriented/vectorial forces. This is in fact the meaning behind the late scholastic concept of articulation as related to measurement and quantification: To express degrees of intelligibility of a subject, form or phenomenon by *putting together* and *joining* (*articulatus*) various intensive and extensive magnitudes which abstract the interaction or points of liaison (joints) between the

³ Ibid. p. 333.

⁴ Hermann Grassmann, *Lehrbuch Der Arithmetik* (Berline: Enslin, 1861), p.1.

subject in question and its surrounding matrix.⁵

Properly speaking, then, magnitudes are expressed through tension-spaces and are rendered intelligible as quantities. Kant suggests that magnitudes are always articulated in negative fashion via an opposition – a dialectic of forces – that joins them together within one subject. To this end, judgment is a tension-space for articulation of magnitudes insofar as judgment is the determination of the magnitude of the universal (nature or a natural law for example) with regard to the magnitude of the particular (the manifold of subjective or cognitive faculties) for and within the thinking subject. Just as the articulation of magnitudes always exerts a dynamic expression that drives the subject (for instance, the motion of the windmill in the above example), judgment does not leave the thinking subject intact either. It drives the subject and its faculties (sense, imagination, reasoning, power of action, ...) *according to the manner by which it expresses and effectuates* the interaction of the universal and the particular, nature and thought, stimulation and sensation. From this perspective, since aesthetics is a category of judgment, a deep understanding of aesthetics as a dynamic interactive system that structures both certain modes of cognition and action is impossible without an analysis of aesthetics and aesthetic judgment in terms of magnitudes and the conditions of their interactivity. Conditions of interactivity can be defined as schemas of space or points of liaison which structurally parameterize and give orientation to each magnitude and by doing so, they dictate the manner by which magnitudes act upon themselves or one another, and consequently drive or mobilize the subject in a specific way. The analysis of the conceptual matrix of aesthetics in order to upgrade it – a task whose absence in canonical art criticism has put art in jeopardy of becoming a bastion for human narcissism and a playground of myopic alliances – leads us to perhaps the most systematically developed account of aesthetic judgment. This is Kant's historically consequential attempt at outlining aesthetics, not in terms of eternal categories, but in terms of the spatiotemporal positioning of the subject within the world and by doing so, putting it in the direction of a thoroughgoing disenchantment.

In *The Critique of Judgment*, Kant formulates aesthetic categories as categories of reflective judgment, while defining modes of judgment themselves in terms of interaction and expression of magnitudes which delineate natural causes (or causal determination) and normative causes specific to the rational agency. But the question is, what is the manner of articulation of aesthetic categories? Under which conditions do magnitudes enter dialectical interaction within the subject? The answer lies in the reflectivity of the reflective judgment. Reflectivity is a specific relation to the world. It is conditioned by a certain intuition of the spatiotemporal arrangement of the subject and the world with regard to one another. The reflective is a topographic model of interaction according to which the magnitudes of thought and nature act upon each other in a specific way. In the reflective relation, the subject is invariably delineated by two vectors, one facing out toward the world and the other facing inside in the direction of the given and allegedly well-secured interiority of the subject. This orthogonal orientation always registers nature as a magnitude both outside the subject and greater than it – an immense entity that is growing, indeterminate and in

⁵ On the concept of articulation with regard to magnitudes and intelligibility, see Gilles Châtelet, *Figuring Space: philosophy, mathematics, and physics* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2000).

excess of the subject. This is because the reflective orientation translates the rigid inside-outside tension of the subject and the world into the open and – hence, indeterminate – magnitude of nature versus the strictly demarcated magnitude of the subject. Moreover, since the reflective relation posits a spatial model in which the world always faces the subject and “is lived as a confrontation”⁶, the articulation of any magnitude associated with an unbound nature or the world is readily quantified *against* the subject. Here we can identify a trajectory of aesthetic and philosophical paradigms – from the Kantian sublime to Bataille’s exorbitance, Freud’s model of trauma, to the philosophy of speculative realism, for which the incalculable scales of nature are readily expressed in confrontation with the human subject. This is, of course, no arbitrary juxtaposition, in that these aesthetic and philosophical paradigms are products of the same model of articulation of magnitudes that is the extension of a quasi-Ptolemaic structural model of the world. ‘Why quasi-Ptolemaic?’ one might ask. Because worldly magnitudes – that is, nature’s dialectics of sameness-otherness, equality-inequality and the relaying of this dialectics by means of magnitudes of tensions and calculi of forces – are always articulated according to a privileged frame of reference: Whereas in the Ptolemaic model, for a subject on the surface of the stationary earth the sky is given as the world above, in the quasi-Ptolemaic model – by virtue of the subject’s privileged frame of reference – the world always confronts the subject as an object of experience, its magnitudes are external to the subject and its perturbing forces are only issued forth from the infinite, formless, and generic (i.e. purposeless) trajectories of nature. The still evolving trajectory of the Copernican Revolution terminates this isolating difference between the world above and the world below, and in the process, it problematizes the subject’s privileged frame of reference.

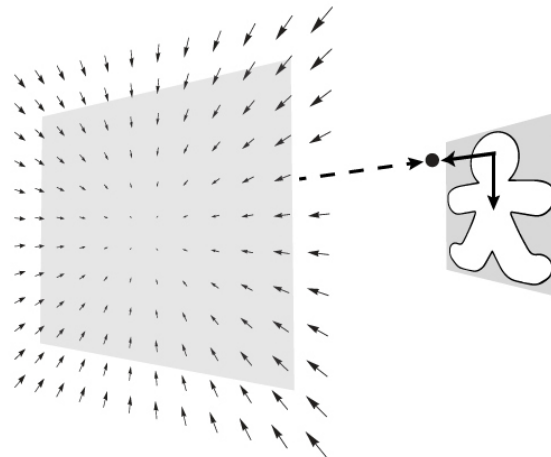


Figure 1: Kant's reflecting bonhomme and its tale-telling world

In the sense that for Kant the aesthetic judgment is a reflective judgment that seeks to find a non-given universal (expressed by an inexact magnitude) for a given particular, it is bound to a certain mode of articulation of magnitudes, as seen in Figure 1. In Kant's aesthetic judgment, nature is inherently susceptible to being expressed by way of a *great* magnitude that always confronts the

⁶ Gilles Châtelet, “Sur une petite phrase de Riemann” in *Analytiques (Psychanalyse-Écritures-Politiques)*, n° 3 (Paris: 1979) pp. 67-75.

subject. This is a restricted tension-space in which forces of the world and the subject, thought and nature, are perpetually posited in a head-to-head collision and generate both privileged visions of nature and bound conceptions of the rational subject.

Accordingly, there is no surprise that at the pinnacle of Kant's aesthetic judgment rests the aesthetic paradigm of the sublime. The sublime and its subject qua genius are not quandaries for the aesthetic judgment, as one might suspect, but are the logical consequences of how worldly magnitudes interact and condition a specific judgment for a subject. When an external indeterminate magnitude associated with an unbound nature or formless object interacts with the intensive magnitude of sensation, a quantity of this interaction for understanding is produced.⁷ If a subjective faculties cannot determine a quality for this quantity because it is an overwhelming quantity that scrambles the senses of the subject, the feeling of the sublime is effectuated. For Kant, beauty, for example, is also a quantity produced by an indeterminable magnitude, but it is a quantity whose quality not only can be determined but also is in harmony with understanding. It is important to note that the external indeterminate magnitude associated with a formless object or boundlessness does not directly give rise to the sublime. The sublime is the consequence of how the indeterminable magnitude is parameterized by the structure of the reflective relation of the experiencing subject to itself and to the world that now appears to be confronting it. The sublime, in this sense, is the outcome of a judgment formed by a subject whose privileged position and frame of reference have not yet been assimilated within the reflexive relation of an absolutized nature to itself. From this perspective, the sublime is not that of the impersonal abyss of nature; it is quite simply confined to the personal.

If until now art has not managed to fully dispel the omnipresent specter of the sublime, it is because: (1) It has not seen the world and the subject within different geometries of interaction, and (2) it has not explored alternative tension-spaces in which magnitudes of this or that event are articulated in different ways and as a result drive the subject in entirely different trajectories. The history of articulation of magnitudes is the history of shifts in geometry of interactions between magnitudes and the examination of complex tension-spaces. In other words, it is the realization that magnitudes, like forces, interact and act upon one another according to the underlying spatial organizations which influence terms of interaction through orienting, arranging and liaising magnitudes. In order to expand frontiers of action and understanding for the subject of judgment, the geometry – that is to say, the spatial organization – of interactions between magnitudes should be treated as a hypothesis. It is the hypothetical structure of the tension-space, its manipulable variables, its normative plasticity, constructible horizon and ramified orientations toward hitherto unenvisaged landscapes that broaden the horizon of understanding and augment the armamentarium of possible action. Constituted by the interaction of magnitudes, judgments are, in this sense, sites for reorientation and navigation according to new rules and spaces.

Within the tension-space, magnitudes play the role of vectors that simultaneously open up new

⁷ Mathematical sublime – as different from the dynamic sublime of worldly magnitudes – is generated by formally *abstracted* magnitudes.

hypotheses of orientation (forcing the subject of judgment to orient toward ...) and dimension (introducing the subject to new spaces of rule-based navigation). Since every magnitude carries its own space or parameterizing structure with it, judgment as a site for the articulation of magnitudes always yields new orientations and dimensions.⁸ Here magnitude is no longer seen as something that affects the subject by decrease or increase (of scales, quantities or intensities) but as something that is capable of creating complex situations of productivity and production for the subject, even new complex magnitudes. Such complex magnitudes are in reality new platforms for expression, manipulation of forces, tensions, syntheses and judgments. The head-to-head model of collision of intensive and extensive magnitudes can be replaced by magnitudes that enter dialectical interactions hitherto inaccessible to the classical subject of personal experience. A whole bestiary of tension-spaces is born in which the interaction of magnitudes enable new modes of extraction of intelligibility, modes of judgment and correspondingly, new decision-making directives, rational orientation and action. The diversification of these tension-spaces, as well as the complex modes of judgments they unlock, is impossible without annulling the subject's privileged frame of reference and immersing its so-called personal reflectivity within the impersonal reflexive continuity of nature to itself. It is the epistemological analysis of nature's protean continuity that grants the possibility of the subject access to a range of complex structures and modes of interaction otherwise inexistent from the reflective perspective.⁹ Likewise, the conceptual foundation of aesthetic judgment must be revised from the viewpoint of this impersonal reflexive field, whose continuity allows not only continuous/constant and discrete/variable structures but also structures with intermediate geometries.¹⁰ This is the kernel of what we shall call – following Charles Sanders Peirce's doctrine of continuity or synechism – the synechistic critique of aesthetic judgment.

⁸ The examination of magnitudes within a continuous medium (rather than a discrete identification) demonstrates that magnitudes are vehicles for transporting spatial situations (such as orientation and dimension) and structural parameters. This is a revolutionary insight of the Kantian philosopher and mathematician Hermann Günther Grassmann. A similar view has been expressed by Leibniz in the context of analysis situs and philosophy of situations. See Hans-Joachim Petsche, *Hermann Grassmann* (Basel: Birkhäuser, 2009), and Vincenzo De Risi, *Geometry and Monadology: Leibniz's Analysis Situs and Philosophy of Space* (Basel: Birkhäuser, 2007).

⁹ The continuity of the reflexive field should be understood as a non-trivial continuity insofar its structure does not permit overstretching any particular field or inflation of any specific horizon and its functions. Neither everything can be subject nor everything can be object. Instead it brings about the possibility of intricate (diachronic, asymmetrical, entangled) co-constitution of subject and object. Furthermore, the non-triviality of this continuity distinguishes the interaction of magnitudes on the basis of their orientations. This allows for diversification of modes of synthesis and respectively, judgment. Suppose A is the oriented magnitude of the subject and B the oriented magnitude of the object. AB is not equal to BA, i.e. they express two non-commutative terms because they are different products of magnitudes and their specific orientations. Since they suggest different syntheses, they occasion and demand different modes of judgment as well.

¹⁰ On continuum as a protean continuity see, Fernando Zalamea, "Peirce's Logic of Continuity: Existential Graphs and Non-Cantorian Continuum" in *The Review of Modern Logic* 9 (2003). Also on the theory of topoi as what "allows the passage from constant to variable sets (and back) and is a basis for studying relationships between (variable) quantities and (variable) structures" see, Francis William Lawvere, "Continuously Variable Sets: Algebraic Geometry = Geometric Logic" in *Proceedings of the Logic Colloquium* (North Holland, 1975), p. 135-157.

The exhaustion of aesthetic judgment and paradigms in contemporary art – what perpetuates the illusion of a fast approaching death for art practices – is largely due to an overinvestment in a model of subjectivity in which the world is always readily lived as an experience, a personal experience. According to such a model, novelty is always the expression of a world that confronts the subject. But since indeterminable magnitudes of a confronting world are always articulated in excess of the magnitudes of the subject, novelty becomes synonymous with energetic rupture, defeat of senses and eruption of a messianic regime of force that is deemed equally liberating and limiting. Any account of aesthetic novelty is surreptitiously built upon a classical regime for the articulation of magnitudes, a trivial tension-space between a subject whose conditions of experience are already given and world that by definition always faces the subject like a tale-telling outside. To overcome the exhaustion and replenish the inventory of aesthetic paradigms as hypotheses through which art further deepens its sovereign trajectory and broadens its scope, it is imperative to accentuate new regimes of tension and diversify tension-spaces. The aim of a tension-space in this case is not to express the quantitative or qualitative measure of the magnitude of the object and the subject, nature and thought, or the stimulation and sensation, in terms of greatness, intensity, size, scale, escalation, intensification and general dissensus between forces. It is instead to re-parameterize and re-program tensions or magnitudes that mobilize the field of the subject by *non-trivial orientations and spaces of navigation*. These tension-spaces bring about the possibility of renegotiating the geometries of interaction between the universal and the particular. The renegotiation of formal dialectical maps between inside and outside, thought and nature, is equal to changing how magnitude finds expression and forces interact. And insofar as the interaction and expression of magnitudes within and for the subject directly determines the mode of judgment, we can say that redefining the spatial situation of local-global products (subject-world, immanence-transcendence) allows new modes of judgment and action. Every geometrical relation in terms of interaction and operation of magnitudes is a propositional content for the subject and is endowed with a pragmatic assertion. It calls for a specific action by conditioning judgment as what forces the subject to enter a complex system of rational commitments, to contrast between existing judgments and taking judgments to their ultimate conclusions. Here lies the meaning behind the task of diversifying modes of judgment by diversifying tension-spaces.

If a lesson to be learned by art from the speculative-scientific history of articulation of magnitudes, it is that magnitudes by themselves – regardless of how great and singular they might be – do not offer any particularly liberating or speculative opportunity for the subject of judgment. The liberation both in terms of judgment and the paradigms it offers is to be found not in the *extent* of this or that event, the intensity of this or that experience but in the non-trivial fields of interaction between them – that is, in the structure of tension-spaces and their valence for moving the subject, even systematically deracinating it, according to complex judgments which not only shed the subject's local privileges but also reorient and reintroduce it to new spaces of navigation, in effect perpetually revising the self-portrait of man drawn in sand. In order to reinvigorate the aesthetic judgment and overcome the paralyzing illusion of the crisis of aesthetic paradigms, art must adopt

new tension-spaces that are not limited to the trivial relation between a world out there and a subject whose condition for experience is already given. It is in its renewed commitment to highlighting and crafting new tension-spaces between the artist and her materials, between the spectator and the art, the manifest and the scientific images,¹¹ the conceptual and the sensible that art finds its own political asymptote. If the global dominance of neo-liberalism aims to nullify all tension-spaces under the pretext of fighting the evil of ideology, the shift from scale of events (magnitudes of tensions and their affective valence) to structures through which such tensions are expressed, manipulated or translated into alternative driving forces for the subject, returns art back to political consequentiality and contemporaneity. Only by seeing and acting beyond the ready-made regime of affect (itself a trivial mode of articulation of worldly magnitudes) and mobilizing its resources in the direction of alternative tension-spaces as navigable hypotheses of understanding and action, can art stave off the realization of a so far illusory death. Without manipulative and navigational possibilities of tension-spaces that align the subject with the deracinating trajectory of modern thought, the prospect of breaking away from existing liberal models of interactivity and trivial tension-spaces of non-cooperation and dissensus is indeed truly remote.

(As for the jaded fascination with great scales of the beyond and their aesthetic import for art: If a genuine inhumanism is to be found, it is not in the expression of great magnitudes of abyssal timescales or vast spaces. It is in how such magnitudes force the sapient to renegotiate its own capacities and descriptions in each and every turn. It is in how tension-spaces drive the rational subject *according to* complex fields of synthesis and navigation maps in which there is no privileged frame of reference whether in the name of the given conditions of experience or the global orientation of an enviroing world. This is the inhumanism intrinsic to articulation and the dynamics of complex magnitudes ensued by the systemic softening of rigid designations of inside and outside as well as conforming to the self-actualizing orientation of reason. It has nothing to do whatsoever with a mystical antihumanism that seeks to belittle the rational subject by imposing upon it the so-called great and singular magnitudes of the universe. Inhuman's aesthetic judgment is not given, it is a matter of struggle, revision and construction.)

¹¹ The manifest image is "the framework in terms of which man came to be aware of himself as man-in-the-world" (Wilfrid Sellars), a commonsense framework comprised of intentions and thoughts through which man correlates the observable image of himself to the world and objects, and understands the world as a global projection of himself. According to American philosopher Wilfrid Sellars, the posterior alternative to the manifest image is the scientific image in which the world consists of microphysical entities behaving according to natural laws that are no longer seen as "truncated persons".